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THE BIG DRAFT

BY MARGARET PRESCOTT MONTAGUE

I SUPPOSE I must begin by explaining what a Draft used in this sense signifies. I have had occasion before this to attempt its definition, and in the effort have applied to dwellers in The Big Draft to assist me, but without much success. With us a draft is a draft, "An' ef you don't natch'ly know what that is, why then, dog-gone it! It's mighty hard to say *what* it is!" But for those who don't "natch'ly know", I may say that a draft is not quite a valley, nor is it exactly a gap. Perhaps it is a mongrel bred of the two, fathered by a gap and mothered by a valley, and is possibly what they speak of in the Tennessee mountains as a "cove". I am aware that this definition smacks somewhat of the Biblical one, "Now an omer is the tenth part of an ephah," which is helpful no doubt if you happen to know how much an ephah is, but if you do not is as cryptic as "How old is Ann?" Well, for those who do not understand the fine points of distinction between valleys, hollows, drafts, coves, gaps and narrows, I will say that a draft looks so much like a valley that only the true mountaineer is aware of the difference. So the average reader may think of it as a valley, and not be far wrong.

We have in our vicinity many drafts, such as Morning Draft, Monroe Draft, and Tuckahoe; but it is with The Big Draft that I am especially concerned. Truth, however, compels me at this point to confess that though I now hail from The Big Draft, I first saw the light in Tuckahoe Draft, and though I moved from there at the early age of one year, nevertheless it was cast in my face in my youth that I was born "up Tuckahoe". The Big Drafters hold the dwellers in other sections in derision, and especially they sing—

Go for to milk, an' milk it in a gourd,
Set it on er bench, an' cover it with a board—
 That's the way they do
In the Tuckahoe crew!

I have a dim recollection of having met this snatch in print somewhere, applied to some other locality; so, though I am familiar with it here, it is probable that it is not entirely original with us, but is a classic bit of criticism, employed in other places. Perhaps indeed, the Athenians sung it of the Spartans; but if so, I do not doubt that the Spartans retorted with a "come back" of their own.

The Big Draft lies in the Alleghanies west of the Blue Ridge, and as in New England they treasure spinning wheels and the like that "came over in the *Mayflower*", so we in our county point with pride and say, "That's the first clock that ever came across the Blue Ridge," or "This was the first silver spoon to come across the Blue Ridge." One inevitably visualizes the first clock and silver spoon, hand in hand, adventuring forth across the Blue Ridge, all unattended by human escort. The thought makes a unique and alluring picture, more unusual than Washington Crossing the Delaware, and one abandons it regretfully to realize that as the spinning wheels did not navigate the *Mayflower* all alone, so the clock and silver spoon were accompanied by ancestors of the present generation. I may remark in passing that the spoon in question is marked with a large S, it having been a wedding present to a dead and gone bride named Charlotte, the engraver of that period being under the impression that Charlotte began with an S. I am tempted to believe that this amiable mistake must have been perpetrated by an ancestor of my own. Certainly from some source I have inherited an unusual mode of spelling. It is only comparatively lately that I have given up spelling polite, "polight". I still think it is a more dignified and courteous looking word, more expressive of its best self, spelled according to my way, than it is in its more common or garden usage. However I bow to the autocratic habits and customs of the dictionary, and return to the habits and customs of The Big Draft, with which indeed I am more at ease.

With clocks and silver spoons, and ancestors, the tide of emigration flowed westward over the Blue Ridge and filled the valleys and drafts, and even surged up to the tops of the mountains. Most of the early emigrants were of the sturdy Scotch-Irish

variety, who had hand to hand encounters with Indians, bears, and wolves. The Indians went early. There are no living inhabitants of The Big Draft who remember them. But the wolves and bears belong to a past still fresh. "Yes," says one friend of mine, a woman not yet sixty years of age of good mountain stock, "in the old days most any night on the mountain you'd be waked by the pigs squealing 'cause the bears was after 'em. An' wolves, too—you could hear 'em howling all round. If they got too close, my old Dad 'ud go out an' blow his hunting horn, an' that always drove 'em away. The next time you heard 'em holler it would be 'way off on a far ridge. That's the reason, I reckon, they's all gone now—they can't stand the sound of the whistles on the trains an' in the lumber camps."

There came on the heels of these first settlers another wave of emigration, made up of people whose forbears had been the early settlers of Virginia. These brought into the mountains the tradition of "Old Virginia"; so much so that one small boy, descendant of this stock, when asked in his Sunday-school lesson where Joseph took Mary and the Young Child when he fled from Herod, answered faithfully, "Back to Old Virginia."

But the Blue Ridge was not all. The Alleghanies were the next barriers confronting the westward tide of humanity. But it flowed across them too. One of the little stations on the railroad east of us is called "Backbone", because when they got the tracks laid as far as that the engineer in charge said, "Now, the backbone of the Alleghanies is broken."

So the pioneers crossed the Blue Ridge, and broke the backbone of the Alleghanies, for when humanity has definitely made up its mind to accomplish anything, nothing can stop it. And, as the negro preacher says, "Right here, brederen an' sisteren, I takes my text"; and in illustration of this truth I would point to our celestial visitor, which alighted suddenly among us to show The Big Draft a new form of conquest.

It came to us, this great battleplane, on the wings of a thunder storm; gray rain and swirling clouds late in the afternoon making it dangerous for it to cross the next range of mountains, and so bringing it to rest in The Big Meadow, right in the heart of The Big Draft. There it lay, this monstrous creature of man's

invention, on the green grass of the meadow for our amazed eyes to gaze upon. Even as I write the words, the picture of it flashes back upon me, rejoicing the "inner eye" with a thrill of delight, and I wish that my pale description might make the reader feel something of the excitement that the advent of this battleplane brought to us of The Big Draft. Some of us had never even seen an airplane before, and those of us who had, had seen them passing remotely overhead, in the strange places of the sky, which, although it has roofed us all our lives, is still an unknown country to us; or else we had seen them at aviation fields very far from The Big Draft. To have one—and it so huge a battleplane—swoop suddenly to rest there in that familiar meadow, surrounded by mountains we knew so well, brought the astonishing things of life into our midst, and laid the miraculous there at our very doors, making us amazingly aware of what human nature is capable. A little distance away winked the pond where wild ducks and geese sometimes alight on their way north; up the hollows and along the tops of the mountains are log cabins, from which looms and spinning wheels have only lately disappeared, none of which things prepare the mind for flying machines. But unless the amazing in the familiar pricks your fancy, you cannot understand what the advent of this celestial visitor meant to us, nor how it opened our eyes and our imagination.

The Draft stopped all its usual activities, and declared a holiday. If you wished to see any of your neighbors, you called upon them in The Big Meadow, and there you found them gazing upon the airplane. Mothers and babies came; grandparents with strings of small descendants; lovers, and young married couples; and little boys. Oh, yes! little boys were everywhere! Young men and maidens, old men and matrons, they were all there; the matrons casting anxious glances back toward home and household duties. And well I know that for many a day to come the bitterest complaint voiced by those who feel that Fate always singles them out for affliction, will be, "I didn't even git to go to the flying machine when hit was here!" Not to "git to go" is one of the tragedies of The Draft. All who came laughed. It was a laughing crowd. I think the strange and unusual nearly always provokes us to mirth.

The first morning after its arrival saw us all assembled. We sat upon the grass before it, waiting to see it fly. While we waited we gossiped, and heard "the news from nowhere"—for the sky is almost nowhere to the average person—and learned the history of our surprising visitor, how it had been on its way to the coal fields west of us, and how the thunder storm had forced it to alight. We were all there in time to see it toss off its morning coffee, which consisted of a hundred and twenty gallons of gasoline, partaken of in two huge gulps of sixty gallons each. This sustenance, sent up from the village, was borne by an arrogant truck, which snorted and galumphed over the uneven meadow, as who should say, "Make way, ambrosia for the gods!" while all the little flivvers backed humbly out of its path, watching with blank and doubtful eyes the disappearance of so much gasoline, and no doubt "'If this should stay to tea,' they said, 'there won't be much for us!'"

Fortified by the gasoline, the battleplane started all its engines, the whirr and stutter of which roared across the valley from ridge to ridge, while we stood back with stopped ears and caught breath, and waited to see it rise. Talk—or rather shout—went round that it had to attain a speed of a hundred miles an hour before it could leave the ground. Could it do it? Was there room for it to rise? Big as the Big Meadow seems to us mountain folk, where for the most part the fields look hardly larger than tablecloths spread upon the hillsides to dry, it was crampingly small for this great visitor's take-off. There lay a stretch of grass before it, and then there came a patch of corn ripening gently to its harvest. There was also a plump haystack in the way. Already upon its landing the flying machine had chewed up much corn. Had it acquired a taste for roasting ears, and would it take another mouthful as it went? And was the haystack safe? One could not but feel that the neighbor whose corn had suffered was playing in unusually bad luck. Nobody else's corn had been so much as touched all summer by flying machines! If this hitherto unheard-of disaster to crops is to become common, what amazing and monstrous scarecrows we shall have to devise for our protection!

The engines roared and roared. Little boys played about in

the blast of wind from the propellers, and grown people were massaged from head to foot by the shudder of them. We watched the corn, we looked upon the haystack, we waited. Then slowly the roaring died, the great propellers whirled to repose, and word was passed about, "Engine trouble—they'll not git off to-day." With that The Draft went home to take up work fitfully, but with ears pricked for the sound of engines in the Big Meadow.

The engine trouble, that complaint so essentially modern, persisted for days, and a smaller machine was sent to the aid of our great monster. This was a gay little ladybird of an airplane that came down in the Meadow, and frisked across the grass with a lightness and vivacity that exhilarated the heart, and which appeared to be epitomized in one of its crew. He was blond, and care-free and mirthful. He sat in his machine above our heads, and laughed down into our respectful faces. He was friendly and young; the blue sky was over him, and the green grass all about; he exuded health and well-being, and a certain mirth which he did not seem able to communicate to us terrestrials. After that for several days the ladybird came and went on errands of mercy for its big disabled companion. The way in which it ate up space astounded us, provoking us to amazed laughter. "Why," we said, "it'll fly fifty miles just to fetch a monkey wrench!"

But its ministrations were not immediately successful, and our celestial visitors lingered there in the Big Meadow from day to day, affording me time to think back into the past, and remember my first introduction to flying machines. That was long ago, when I was of so tender an age that our delightful old rector, the first person with whom I ever associated flying, never talked to me about it but down on all fours played bear with my small brother and myself. That was in the old days when The Draft was so remote that during the winter we had church only when there was a fifth Sunday in a month. Now fifth Sundays are so rare that a collector of days would be interested in them as specimens, and because of their rarity, when I was small, church-going was not a bore but an event. On fifth Sundays our old rector came from twenty miles away to preach in the little log

schoolhouse of The Draft, to play bear with us children, and to discuss the Order of Melchizedek and flying machines with the grown-ups. All would be quiet in our little sitting room, when suddenly the rector would leap up, and jumping on the seat of a low chair, would take a visiting card, and knocking it off a book watch it plane slowly to the floor. In the sight he saw marvelous things, for he had invented a flying machine—a flying machine that flew! Long before the Wrights were in the air, our old rector had flown. Unfortunately, however, he flew with clipped wings, his wife having forbidden him to experiment with his invention anywhere save in the cellar. Now for a flying machine that is going to fly, a cellar is about the worst place in the world for its initial flight! Imagine the cruelty of fate that hatched such a denizen of cloud and space in such quarters! It flew, indeed, but it hit the ceiling with prompt and disastrous results both to itself and to its inventor. But it had flown and flying was coming—was indeed already on the way. So even in my childhood I had heard the fluttering of wings; and now here was this great battleplane to testify to our old rector's wisdom, and to the tremendous fact that when human nature once makes up its mind to accomplish a thing, *nothing* can stop it. To attain its end it will rive "the rocks, and swim the sea," cross the Blue Ridge, and break the backbone of the Alleghanies.

The little ladybird machine continued to come and go on behalf of the battleplane, making all our necks feel the severe strain of sky gazing. I suppose in ten thousand years Nature may adjust the human muscles to an upward glance, but in the mean time we of the present must suffer many a stiff neck. It was a relief when the small machine was on the grass. Yet there is something about flying machines alighting, and taxi-ing across the ground, that always gives me, for one, a queer shivery feeling, a thrill of hysteria, of revulsion, of wild mirth, and—and—well, just of *queerness*! Can it be that long ago ancestors of my own were clawed by flying dragons? I do not know. I only know that when I think of dragons, half flying, half wriggling dreadfully across the grass, and see an airplane thus intimately on the ground, I seem to touch a dim rudimentary instinct that responds with a grotesque revulsion.

But at last the great day came, the battleplane flew, and all the inhabitants of The Big Draft were there to see it. Oh, trust us for that! Hadn't we almost taken our little porringers and eaten our suppers with it daily in fear that it might get off without us? The babies, the lovers, the grandparents, the young couples, the small boys, were there—we were all there!

Willing helpers pushed it up to the furthest corner of the Meadow, and a chain of men tugging at the propellers cranked it successfully. It roared gloriously, no engine trouble now! The pilot put on his coat and mounted to his nest; one daring little boy, to show off before the girls, took a last run in front of it, and as he did so the engines changed from a muffled roar to a full blast of sound, and that little boy thought his last hour had come! We looked upon the haystack, we prayed for the cornfield. The battleplane moved, it started, it began to run across the Meadow, faster and faster; oh, very fast indeed! All at once it had left the ground, and was in the air! For an instant its gray spread wings were outlined against Greenbrier Mountain; the next it was in the sky, safe in its element, high over our heads, beautiful and remote—in the catch of a breath gone from the known into the unknown, out of our world forever.

As for me, I shall be dead and in my grave when I cease to respond with an ecstasy of delight to that instant when a flying machine leaves the ground for the air. Not when it is in the sky, not when it is on the ground, but just at that fleeting moment of ascension, hardly glimpsed before it is gone—that is the miracle, the ecstasy! When I saw that great battleplane rise against Greenbrier Mountain, in all that familiar scenery, something clutched me by the throat, tears leaped in my eyes, a door within opened, and I said, "There is nothing the human mind cannot accomplish if it thinks over it hard enough and long enough!"

Perhaps I had known this before, but I never knew it so hard or so certainly as I did in the fleeting instant that that great airship sailed out of the Big Meadow. Here it was in all our well-known surroundings one moment, the next triumphantly gone into space. It was the amazing in the familiar that burst open the door, and filled me with astonishment over humanity's incredible resignation. We do not have to stand anything if we

do not choose to. Individuals may have to, certainly; for often it requires more than one generation to work out salvation. But the race working collectively through the years can have what it wants, can set itself free of any evil, can conquer the sea, the earth, and the air. Certainly we of The Big Draft ought to know this with the history of our conquering pioneer days still so fresh in the mind, with the Blue Ridge crossed, the backbone of the Alleghanies broken, and now the mastery of the air demonstrated for us here in our Big Meadow. If humanity makes up its mind to have anything, nothing can be denied to it. Why then should we sit down tamely under any affliction? What have all the lazy people of the past been about that we should still have to suffer such evils as famines, wars, pestilence, insanity, blindness, and cancer? And how hard are we of the present—also lazy people—caring to deliver the next generation from these agonies? Not very hard, certainly, or we should be free of them. With such God-given capacities as we possess, it is only our amazing and supine indifference that keeps us where we are.

But how curious is the human mind! Why do certain generations care for certain things? Why, for instance, does the average man of the present take a more burning interest in automobiles than he does in a cure for cancer? Why does this generation care so passionately to annihilate space? I do not know. I only know that we do, and in consequence we whiz with incredible speed from place to place, for what we want we get. And now we fly. What spirit went abroad to prod us up into the sky? To trouble humanity so at this time that the earth could no longer satisfy us, but we must adventure into the clouds as well? A spirit so ardent that even our old rector caught the contagion, and flew, albeit only in a cellar; and now airplanes come down in the Big Meadow where heretofore only the wild geese and ducks alighted. For once the past and present met vividly before our eyes and showed us what humanity can do with the “arrows of desire”, pointing us to the way of conquest:

Bring me my bow of burning gold,
Bring me my arrow of desire;
Bring me my spear; O clouds unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!

Well—the little ladybird machine ran skipingly across the grass and jumped into the air, and presently was up there with the battleplane, circling high over our heads. For a few minutes they tarried, and then they turned, and swam swiftly away to the south, away from The Big Draft, over our familiar hills, over Kate's Mountain and White Rock, away and away, until the distant sky swallowed them from view, and they were gone out of our horizon and knowledge forever.

And we of The Big Draft took our eyes down from the heavens, we rubbed our weary necks, and we said, “Well now, *ain't* that a sight!” And then we went home to pick up once more our everyday affairs. But for a space we had associated with the gods, we had entertained a celestial visitor, we had extended our vision, and had caught a glimpse of the conquering power of the mind of man.

MARGARET PRESCOTT MONTAGUE.